

THE RAVALLI COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING PROGRAM PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

INTRODUCTION

A recurring question that has arisen over the past several years is how we can transform the Ravalli County Planning Program from one focused on the perpetual grind of day to day subdivision review into a proactive planning program. During this same time period, the Ravalli County Board of County Commissioners have made a number of changes to try and address this issue including approving funding and staffing enhancements for the Planning Department, developing and endorsing a more proactive work plan, and encouraging broad based community discussions on planning issues, but there remain additional needs and funding gaps. This proposal attempts to identify the problem and it suggests potential enhancements that could, with the support of partners through private donations, grants and other resources, help this County make significant strides forward in proactive community-based planning.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ravalli County was the fastest growing county in the State of Montana between 1990 and 2000 and it has remained among the top five fastest growing counties in the state for population growth since 2000; however, this county struggles to effectively fund the growth management programs that are critical to maintaining this incredible place and the closely related quality of life of the people who live here.

Ravalli County is a place defined by the single watershed of the Bitterroot River that bisects a relatively small peninsula of private lands surrounded by public lands (approximately 73% of the county is federal land). It is these natural amenities, as well as the working agricultural lands of the Valley, that draw people to this area to enjoy the scenic views and the recreational opportunities. Other factors contributing to growth in the Valley include:

- The retirement of the Baby Boomer generation that is looking for areas with amenities found in places like the Bitterroot Valley
- Economic prosperity and first class collegiate educational opportunities in the Missoula urban area that draws people to Ravalli County who prefer to make their homes in a more rural setting
- Expansion of GlaxoSmithKline, the Rocky Mountain Laboratories, a bio-safety level 4 research facility, and US Highway 93
- The potential development of a destination ski resort in Missoula County between Lolo and Florence

Challenges for growth management in Ravalli County include a lack of commercial and industrial lands that would better help finance County services, consistently high subdivision review workload¹, and an annual potential for decrease of federal funds available to local governments that would cripple funding of local services.

¹ The subdivision review workload has been temporarily reduced with the institution of countywide zoning, which affected approximately 25 subdivisions in process. Of that number, 14 subdividers are in a lawsuit over

Project partners have historically recognized the importance of public lands, water quality and air quality as primary contributors to quality of life. However, active support by a broad segment of the community for a combination approach to growth management that includes regulatory tools as well as incentives is relatively new.

After several failed attempts to develop a new comprehensive plan, the County successfully created a Growth Policy (typically called a comprehensive plan or master plan in other states) utilizing a broad-based community involvement process. Part of the Growth Policy demographic and economic analysis was based on a needs assessment conducted by Dr. Larry Swanson of the Center for the Rocky Mountain West at the University of Montana. At that time Dr. Swanson emphasized the need for Ravalli County to move forward with growth management planning to address growth issues and protect the economic vitality of this area. The Growth Policy was adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in 2002 (amended in 2004 - <http://www.ravallcounty.mt.gov/planning/growthpolicy.pdf>) and it officially established the following goals, which were supported at the polls by voters in the November 2004 election:

- 1A. Promote public open space, recognizing agriculture and forestry as valued land resources.
- 1B. Promote private open land, farm land, ranch land, and recognition of agriculture and forestry as valued land resources.
2. Protect water quality and supply.
3. Protect air quality.
4. Provide necessary infrastructure and public services to accommodate population growth and new development without undue impacts on the quality, quantity and cost of service to existing residents.
5. Protect and enhance natural resources and public open space.
6. Promote and encourage a vibrant, sustainable, healthy economic environment that recognizes existing businesses and attracts new entrepreneurs.
7. Plan for residential and commercial development.

In 2006, the Right to Farm and Ranch Board and the Bitter Root Land Trust collaborated to explore in more detail the state of working agricultural lands and conservation issues through an agricultural study. The study was intended to follow up on the original needs assessment completed for Ravalli County by Dr. Larry Swanson. It included a data analysis and assessment component, but it also provided for a series of broad-based community meetings to learn about growth, issues facing the County related to growth, and an examination of different opportunities and tools the County and various organizations might utilize for addressing growth. Dr. Larry Swanson and Dave Schultz of Schultz and Associates helped complete the initial phases of this project which further assessed the state of the Valley. (<http://www.bitterrootlandtrust.org/index.php?id=46>) Dr. Swanson's new study built on his

the implementation of the zoning as it relates to their projects and there is always the potential that some or all of the affected projects could be re-activated. Furthermore, due to the enactment of countywide zoning, the typical subdivision fees that help fund the Planning Department have been significantly reduced, which is anticipated to continue while the zoning is in place.

earlier needs assessment and he recommended three key tools for addressing agriculture issues in particular and growth in general. To best protect agricultural lands, Dr. Swanson recommended:

1. Public education about area agriculture
2. Agricultural marketing and promotion
3. Planning for growth including
 - a. Guiding housing and commercial development nearby and within established population centers;
 - b. Keeping development in outlying areas relatively sparse or clustered;
 - c. Clustering homes and preserving larger areas as pasture lands, or other open land areas;
 - d. Passing an open space bond to protect key open landscapes; and,
 - e. Developing streamside setbacks to protect streams and waterways.

The final phase of the Agricultural Study project is to work with the community to develop and implement strategies to address the identified issues. This phase of the project has not yet been completed.

Ravalli County, as it has grown and changed, has sought balance between protecting the natural amenities of the Bitterroot Valley and encouraging the growth of thriving communities. However, one of the primary difficulties for Ravalli County has been to implement proactive growth management programs in accordance with the pace of growth, while continuing to keep up with the mandated regulatory workload (subdivision review, floodplain permit review, etc.).

None-the-less, it appears the time is now to put in place critical measures that can protect the attributes of the Bitterroot Valley that make this a phenomenal place to live and drive the economic vitality of the area. In order to do this effectively, we must have experienced and steadfast program coordination and leadership, high quality data and analysis upon which to make decisions, and a broad-based community outreach and engagement process guiding community decision makers.

RAVALLI COUNTY PLANNING PROGRAM GOALS AND CHALLENGES

Given the growth pressures that are anticipated to continue into the future, the results of the Agricultural Study, the support from the Growth Policy, and the successful planning-related initiatives on the ballot, a comprehensive planning program has been developed for the Bitterroot Valley that includes the following items as top priorities, among many other planning activities, over the next two years:

- **Increase public involvement in the planning processes** that focuses on developing the capacity of local government and residents to effectively engage in growth management issues that protect key amenities and provide the basis for efficient expansion of infrastructure and services
- **Develop a Countywide zoning program** that in the first year and a half will focus on basic Countywide regulations addressing density and land use, as well as streamside

setbacks, that can also incorporate additional design standards and other growth management tools in subsequent phases

- **Develop an open lands program** that will provide guidance to expenditure of the Open Lands Bond as well as appropriate zoning and other planning tools for protection and enhancement of agricultural lands, wildlife habitat and surface water resources
- **Update and modernize subdivision regulations and other regulatory tools** to include best practices for growth management in rural areas such as cluster development standards and conservation subdivision design options that will complement the baseline Countywide zoning project
- **Continue mandated planning activities**, such as subdivision review, with emphasis on meeting local and state deadlines.

The key limitations for moving the Planning Program forward in a timely, comprehensive, and sustainable manner include a lack of capacity for project management and technical planning assistance, limited funding for data analysis, and additional resources needed for effective public outreach and public engagement activities.

The County has assessed the limited resources available given these needs and other priority programs and services supported by local government funding and re-allocated additional staff and financial resources to help support a very ambitious planning program. However, it is simply not enough to keep pace with growth and deal with the existing backlog of work. (The initial plans to work towards the planning program priorities are memorialized in a series of documents that include the Countywide zoning work plan, preliminary financial proposal and proposed allocation of staff time.

<http://www.ravallimountaincounty.mt.gov/planning/CountywideZoning.htm>) To accomplish the stated priorities in a timely fashion and truly build a sustainable comprehensive planning program that implements the Ravalli County Growth Policy and the Agricultural Study, Ravalli County needs additional resources, even one-time infusions, to help develop its capacity to deal with growth issues.

RAVALLI COUNTY PLANNING PROGRAM ENHANCEMENTS

In the long term, the Countywide Planning Program will provide for increased capacity of planning department staff, public leaders and the citizens to initiate and engage in planning activities; an enhanced ability among citizens to engage in civil discourse about growth management and other planning issues; and a foundation of basic planning and zoning tools upon which the community can build.

The following Planning Program enhancements will contribute to the implementation of the above stated long-term goals:

1. **Work with professional planning consultants as needed to provide increased depth of experience and capacity to the Planning Department for project management, coordination and technical assistance for the following project components:**
 - a. Countywide baseline zoning

- b. Streamside setbacks
- c. Open Lands Program Planning
- d. Update and modernize subdivision regulations

Action Item 1 – Contract with a third party planning consultant to manage and help staff the Countywide zoning project by providing technical assistance, development of appropriate regulations, outreach and public engagement. This action item will help infuse the project with additional professional planning staff specifically trained in zoning and rural planning issues, as well as relieve the Planning Director of some project management responsibilities. There are few, if any, local firms or individuals that conduct this type of work, but there are opportunities for an outside firm to partner with a smaller firm, such as the Public Policy and Research Institute at the University of Montana, specializing in outreach and public engagement activities that may help ensure that the activities and the project work plan are appropriate to the area. A consulting firm will need to:

- i. Evaluate the program to date and start moving forward from the current situation to build on and enhance the existing program.
- ii. Design their role such that they partner with local organizations, planning staff, Planning Board members, elected officials, community planning committees and other citizen planners to develop local capacity for working on land use planning and zoning on this project and future projects.
- iii. Work closely with subcontractors providing data analysis assistance to help determine how to best involve the public in the data analysis component of the project and utilize the results of the data analysis in outreach efforts and as the basis for public engagement activities.
- iv. Provide for implementation of the zoning, once adopted, by training Planning staff and other interested parties and providing educational and administrative materials.
- v. Support the implementation of streamside protection standards.

Action Item 2- Provide start-up funding for coordination of the Open Lands Program, with particular focus on development of an open lands plan that will guide expenditure of the Open Lands Bond, provide a plan for land conservation in rural areas, inform the baseline zoning project, suggest other implementation options, and create a foundation for future Open Lands Bond(s).

- 2. Dedicate increased resources for data gathering and evaluation to provide for more sophisticated modeling that will inform the development of regulations and policies specific to:**
- a. Countywide baseline zoning
 - b. Streamside setbacks
 - c. Open Lands Program Planning

Action Item – Increase the scope of work for the GIS consultant to include additional data evaluation and modeling specific to each of the aforementioned projects. For the Countywide baseline zoning project the action item will provide more sophisticated modeling. The Open Lands Program and streamside setback proposal Countywide modeling work can provide some baseline information to support these projects. Modeling different build-out and density scenarios to help all parties gain a better understanding of development densities and the potential outcomes of choices made regarding establishing zoning districts in different areas is also a potential option.

3. Work with trained facilitators and provide additional support to enhance a coordinated public outreach campaign and increase opportunities for public engagement in the Countywide Planning Program.

- a. Countywide baseline zoning
- b. Streamside setbacks
- c. Open Lands Program Planning

Action Item - Expand the current outreach program to include such items as Countywide mailings, newsletters, as well as redesign of the County website to make it more user friendly and provide opportunities for input. Provide for trained staff and independent facilitators, as needed, consistently to local citizen groups in each planning area within the County. Provide additional resources for outreach and engagement activities such as a laptop, projector, and GIS license.

PROJECT MONITORING

In order to monitor the progress and success of the planning program project managers, major partners, and grantors will use the timeline, work plan, and budget to gauge results. If it is found that the project is not meeting its intended targets at any point, then the project managers will be responsible to evaluate the project as it stands, recognize the situations that have resulted in the project not meeting its intended targets, and modify the future work plan, timeline, and/or budget to reflect successful implementation despite setbacks. In addition to these efforts, a project oversight committee will be developed to help track the Planning Program and benchmarks will also be established to help this committee, project managers and any potential program partners in tracking progress on the various planning activities.

Project Oversight

A small (5-7 person) oversight committee will be developed to help with the following objectives:

1. Provide consistent fiscal oversight
2. Provide guidance and recommendations to the County and program partners when there are potential needs to change allocation of funds or re-arrange priorities. This will include recommending priorities for funding if there is less than the total amount suggested in the enhancement budget available.
3. Provide assistance and guidance to the County and program partners if and when major challenges present themselves in the implementation of one of the projects.

4. Within the scope of the planning program, ensure that the objectives are met.

Benchmarks

Benchmarks or key milestones are thresholds that are typically established to help track the progress of a particular project or program. Given the number of planning program activities that are suggested to be underway simultaneously, it makes sense to establish benchmarks that will help the public, the County, financial and other partners, and project managers track various planning program initiatives. They will help us all to identify successes as Ravalli County moves forward with this program and they can also help us to identify when the program needs to be re-evaluated and the work plan adjusted. Although most of this proposal has been focused on enhancements to the Ravalli County Planning Program that will help move the program past its typical priority of mandated reviews this section also includes suggested benchmarks for the mandated planning program activities.

Benchmarks are typically tied in to a work plan to help understand not just if the project is progressing, but if the project is progressing in a timely fashion. At this time, only the countywide baseline zoning project has a work plan associated with it. For the streamside setbacks, Open Lands Program planning and Update and Modernize Subdivision regulations projects, other than the initial steps, these benchmarks will not be tied into a timelines until work plans are established.

The following benchmarks have been identified for key planning program elements:

Countywide baseline zoning (to be tied to the work plan, as amended)

- Work plan established
- Public Outreach Plan completed
- Initial draft zoning regulations completed
- Initial rounds of community meetings completed (introduction to the project, overview of zoning regulations and community planning committees, zoning regulations workshops, community planning committee workshops, overview of land suitability analysis)
- RFQ/RFP process completed and a planning consulting firm has been identified to take over project management and some technical assistance components of the project (*this benchmark is dependent on finding additional funding resources and it is not included in the current work plan*)
- Community Planning Committees established in each planning area
- Methodology created for developing zoning maps for planning areas
- Zoning maps created for each planning area
- Final zoning regulations completed
- Final countywide zoning map created
- Zoning regulations and countywide zoning map adopted

Streamside setbacks

- Streamside setback committee created and members selected
- Work plan for committee and streamside setback program established

- Streamside setback options identified
- Public outreach plan completed
- Recommended streamside setback measures proposed by streamside setback committee (may include regulatory and non-regulatory elements)
- Streamside setback measures adopted

Open Lands Program planning

- Program coordinator in place
- Two-year work program for Open Lands Board and coordinator adopted
- Open lands plan goals and objectives identified
- Open lands plan developed
- Public outreach plan and materials developed
- Open lands plan adopted
- Review of open lands bond application and criteria against Open Lands Plan completed and adjustments, if necessary, adopted

Update and modernize subdivision regulations

- Scope of work established
- RFQ/RFP process completed and consultant identified
- Work plan developed
- Draft regulation revisions completed
- Workshops and other public involvement activities completed
- Regulations revised and new draft completed
- Regulations adopted

Continue mandated planning activities

- Subdivision review timelines met
- Floodplain application review timelines met
- Citizen-petitioned zoning districts reviewed in timely manner
- Violations (zoning, floodplain, subdivision) processed in timely manner

BUDGET

The attached budget proposal is aligned with the Ravalli County Planning Program Enhancements.

POTENTIAL SOURCES OF FUNDING

As noted above, as the strategic priorities were established and a work plan for the Countywide Zoning Project was adopted, the Ravalli County Planning Department and the Board of County Commissioners re-allocated funding to support these efforts. The Planning Department also initiated discussions with interested community members to discuss other opportunities for funding this overall planning program both to address the current priorities and to provide a long term stable funding base that will allow this program to be sustainable.

Towards that end, the following opportunities have been pursued in order to support planning activities:

- Montana Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Planning Grant for approximately \$15,000 – submitted April 20th and a response to the application is anticipated in July. A CDBG planning grant was anticipated to be an original source of the Countywide Zoning Project funding. It is considered to be essential to the original zoning work plan and not a source of funding for any additional budget items. Funds are designated to support data gathering and development of a land suitability analysis for the Countywide Zoning Project.
- Revised Fee Schedule Proposal – Adopted by the Board of County Commissioners on May 7th. The purpose of the fee schedule is to achieve 100% coverage of project review costs. Unfortunately, while the interim zoning is in place, staff expects revenues to drop which will add to the difficulties for funding the Planning Department.
- Conservation and Resource Development Division (CARDD) Grant through the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for \$100,000 towards LiDAR mapping for the northern half of Ravalli County. Grant application was successful and funds should be released in summer 2007.
- Preparation is underway for the Planning Department's FY 2007-2008 budget. Initial budget hearing was May 7th. Adoption usually occurs around September or October. This proposal covers the staffing and operations of the entire Planning Department and it includes the funding for the Ravalli County match.
- Private Donations – initial discussions with a funding resources committee indicated there was positive interest in the community if the funding was routed through a private non-profit corporation, such as the Bitter Root Resource and Conservation District (RC&D) or the Bitter Root Land Trust. A small group of individuals have stated that investment of \$50,000-\$100,000 by the local building industry association, or individuals associated with this industry, to match other local donors and/or a successful grant proposal would be a real possibility.
- Montana Department of Transportation – There may be funds available to assist communities in land use planning, particularly associated with the highway corridors. Staff is researching this opportunity.
- Montana Smart Growth and Sonoran Institute – Staff is currently consulting with these organizations to determine if potential partnerships exist for this program.
- Other grants – As time allows, staff is researching grant opportunities to support the County's planning program.
- Planning levy – Initial research has been conducted by staff and committee volunteers for this potential long-term funding tool. Additional research regarding potential benefits and shortcomings needs to be completed.
- Brainerd Foundation – the County has been participating in discussions with the Brainerd Foundation regarding potential funding opportunities. To date, these discussions have been preliminary only and no agreements have been agreed upon.